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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1534
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 002782

D FOR BARRY

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SUBJECT: LAF CLASHES WITH PALESTINIANS IN BIQA'

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR VINCENT M. BATTLE; REASONS 1.5 (B), (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: THE LEBANESE ARMED FORCES (LAF) EXCHANGED FIRE WITH PALESTINIANS NEAR BAALBECK THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 4 DURING AN ARMS SEIZURE OPERATION AGAINST AN "ABU NIDAL ORGANIZATION (ANO) ARMS DEPOT" LOCATED JUST OUTSIDE THE AL-GALIL PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP IN THE BIQA. ONE LAF SOLDIER AND THREE PALESTINIANS WERE KILLED. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) ACCORDING TO PRESIDENTIAL ADVISOR WASSEF SERHAN, EARLY ON SEPTEMBER 4 THE LAF RAIDED AN ANO WEAPONS CACHE NEAR THE AL-GALIL PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMP, LOCATED ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF BAALBECK IN THE BIQA' VALLEY. SARHAN CLAIMED THAT AS THE LAF DEPARTED THE SCENE WITH CONFISCATED ARMS, A CROWD OF PALESTINIANS FORMED AND BEGAN TO THROW STONES. ARMED ELEMENTS WITHIN THE CROWD THEN FIRED ON THE LAF, WHICH RETURNED FIRE, RESULTING IN THE DEATHS OF ONE SOLDIER AND TWO PALESTINIANS. SARHAN SAID THE LAF DID NOT ENTER THE AL-GALIL CAMP DURING THE OPERATION.

¶3. (C) DOUREID YAGHI, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE PROGRESSIVE SOCIALIST PARTY FROM BAALBECK, CONFIRMED THIS ACCOUNT. HE SAID THE LAF UNIT RAIDED A FATAH REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL (ANO) WAREHOUSE, CONFISCATING A TRUCKLOAD OF WEAPONRY AND AMMUNITION. THE LAF UNIT THEN CAME UNDER FIRE AS IT WAS LEAVING THE WAREHOUSE. ONE SOLDIER WAS KILLED AND TWO WERE WOUNDED, WHILE TWO PALESTINIANS WERE KILLED AND 16 WERE WOUNDED. YAGHI ALSO REPORTED THAT THE LAF SENT ABOUT 1000 TROOPS, WITH TANKS AND APCs, TO ENCIRCLE THE CAMP. OTHER SOURCES REPORTED THAT THE MAIN ROAD INTO BAALBECK WAS CLOSED BY THE LAF IN THE COURSE OF THE OPERATION.

¶4. (U) LOCAL TELEVISION COVERAGE SHOWED PALESTINIANS THROWING STONES AND BLOCKING ROADS WITH BURNING TIRES TO PREVENT THE LAF FROM ENTERING THE AL-GALIL CAMP. INTERIOR MINISTER ELIAS MURR, VISITING THE BIQA' THE SAME DAY TO VIEW GOL DRUG ERADICATION EFFORTS, REPORTEDLY HELD AN EMERGENCY MEETING IN THE NEARBY TOWN OF ZAHLE. MURR INDICATED TO THE PRESS THAT THE GOL WILL TIGHTEN MEASURES AGAINST THE CAMP IF THE KILLER OF THE LAF SOLDIER IS NOT TURNED OVER TO THE GOL.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: WHILE MURR'S COMMENTS REFLECT SHADES OF THE LAF KILLINGS AND HANDOVER OF SUNNI EXTREMIST ABU OBEIDA FROM THE AIN EL-HILWEH CAMP IN JULY, THE TWO INCIDENTS ARE NOT LIKELY RELATED. FOLLOWING THE ABU OBEIDA HANDOVER, HOWEVER, THE GOL HAS GROWN INCREASINGLY BOLDER IN ITS EFFORTS TO DEAL WITH WHAT IT CONSIDERS TO BE FUGITIVES AND DANGEROUS ELEMENTS IN/AROUND LEBANON'S PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS. STILL, THE LAF HAS NOT CROSSED THE LINE AND ENTERED PALESTINIAN CAMPS, WHICH HAVE LONG BEEN NO-GO AREAS FOR THE GOL. THE AL-GALIL CAMP IS RELATIVELY SMALL, WITH ONLY A FEW THOUSAND RESIDENTS, AND HAS NOT PRESENTED THE SAME DEGREE OF LAWLESSNESS AND CONCERN AS AIN EL-HILWEH (RESIDENT POPULATION OF APPROXIMATELY 70,000). WE DO NOT KNOW WHY THE LAF DECIDED TO RAID THE ANO WEAPONS CACHE AT THIS PARTICULAR TIME; THE ANO HAS NOT PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN LEBANON FOR SOME TIME. WHILE THE GOL MAY HAVE ACTED NOW TO CAPITALIZE ON THE RECENTLY REPORTED DEATH OF ABU NIDAL IN BAGHDAD, THIS ACTION MAY SIMPLY BE PART OF SYRIAN/GOL EFFORTS TO BALANCE AND CONTROL PALESTINIAN FORCES IN LEBANON. END COMMENT.

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